



Sweat the Details

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By Lt. Brian Sinclair

We launched at midday for a seemingly uneventful tanker mission during the final weeks of COMPTUEX. It was quite cloudy, but we shot off the front end Case I. Seconds after getting airborne, we lost lock on the ship's TACAN. Fortunately, a COD had launched off the bow ahead of us, so I told my rightseater (COTAC) to watch him for a climb. I figured we would climb at the same point he did.

As we started our climb, I turned my head to the left to search for the off-going tanker, 706, at Angels 7 and heard a loud bang. It sounded like someone had fired a .22 rifle. I felt a small sting on my cheek, then suddenly, there was a faint powder-burn smell, and the radios went dead.

Photo by Cdr. Chris Buhlmann

After I regained my composure and checked for blood, I realized the ICS also was fried. I continued to climb as I looked at the pilot's radio console, looking for signs of fire or damage. I got a visual on 706, with the skipper on board, and began to join. My rightseater was working feverishly to revive the radios. I joined and briefly looked away to fiddle with the backup function of the ICS but with no joy.

I gave 706 a package check as I cleared to the right. I wrestled with the pilot's antiquated backup radio and selected the squadron tac freq. I hailed 706, but there was no response. I asked them to shake their heads if they heard me, but the radio apparently was not transmitting. I again tried comm on guard—once again, to no avail. I moved to the acute position and signaled the skipper we were NORDO. We remained overhead the carrier while 706 coordinated an early recovery.

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As the section descended through the clouds, my skipper kissed off and motioned for us to join on 702, another S-3. Maneuvering around the carrier, we prepared to land and dropped our hook. I always drop the hook, then lock my harness. When I checked my harness though, I noticed that only three points were lockable. I tried several times but never got a solid fourth-point response. I looked at my Koch fitting and saw it was not attached to my parachute. I finally put two and two together and realized the loud sound I'd heard on climbout was my SEAWARS blowing. We safed our seats and made the call to divert.

I selected guard on the backup radio and transmitted our intentions in the blind, with no response. Fortunately, my quick-thinking COTAC relayed our intentions to 702 on guard,

over his PRC-90. When 702 responded on guard, I realized my backup radio worked, but only in the receive mode. Our comms now were a bizarre CRM drill. He would transmit, then I would listen for the response and yell it to him over the cockpit noise.

We started a slow section climb through nasty weather and headed for Roosevelt Roads. At Angels 11, I had to maintain parade formation for 20 minutes, as the rain and clouds created a thick, bright-white haze between my lead and me.


The COTAC put Roosevelt Roads in the GPS that we used in place of our TACAN. About 30 miles out, 702 gave me the signal to drop my hook. I dropped the hook and moved acute, so they visually could inspect its position. We proceeded through the checklists and talked about the possibility of a hook skip on a wet runway with carrier-pressurized tires.

As I broke out the runway, I calmly thought the drill almost was over. We were shooting a PAR to runway 25. GCA dropped the section off high—I mean, real high and fast. As lead dropped me off, the expression on his face seemed to say, "Sorry dude, good luck."

I went to idle and started to stand on the DLC, dropping the nose to lose altitude. I suddenly had strange flashbacks to PAs in Kingsville. I reefed the nose at the right moment, and we touched down just before the gear. Observers later asked me if I was flying a dual-engine-flameout approach—kind of sporty, I thought.

With a gentle tug, my fun finally was over—safe on deck. I assumed the day's events had earned us a night on the beach at the Conquistador. No such luck. The handlers turned around my jet in no time flat, so we headed back to the CV and made it on deck in time for mid-rats.

Postflight inspection revealed that electrostatic discharge from the canopy had fried the radios because of a shortage of static wicks on the aircraft.

Always check your PRC before walking; you may need it, even if you still are in the jet. 

Lt. Sinclair flies with VS-31.